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SUBJECT: THAILAND: PACOM CMDR ADM FALLON'S ROUNDTABLE ON  
THE MUSLIM SOUTH

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason: 1.4 (d)

11. (C) Summary. On May 3, PACOM Commander ADM Fallon and the Ambassador met with a select group of Thai academics and activists to discuss the separatist insurgency in Thailand's Muslim-majority deep South. The Thai analysts spoke of tensions from Bangkok's historical efforts to integrate the Muslim South into the Thai nation. However, despite some differences among themselves, they in various ways blamed poor Thaksin administration policies -- which allowed a deteriorating internal situation to be exploited by local militants -- for the current upsurge in violence. One security affairs specialist emphasized that the level of violence in the South is unprecedented, large amounts of money are involved, and that the potential exists for the area to become a staging area for outsiders. The others focused on local origins and solutions for the separatist conflict. All agreed that obtaining accurate information and a clear picture on the South is complicated.

12. (C) The Thais were cautiously optimistic about the efforts of the fledgling National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) to find solutions, if sustained support from PM Thaksin and the military is forthcoming. Asked by ADM Fallon what the U.S. could do to help, the Thais said that negative interpretations of American policies in the Middle East complicate the U.S. ability to help. However, they suggested that human rights and peacekeeping training for the Thai military, and pressure on the Royal Thai Government (RTG) to pursue "good governance" in the South, would be useful. End Summary.

13. (U) The Thai participants were: Dr. Panitan Wattanayagorn, Chulalongkorn University; Dr. Mark Tamthai, Vice Chairman of the Non-Violence Commission, National Security Council (NSC), and NRC member; Dr. Gothom Arya, Director of the Peaceful Solution Studies and Development Center, Secretary General of the human rights NGO Forum Asia, and Joint Secretary, NRC; and Sunai Phasuk, Bangkok Director, Human Rights Watch, Asia Division. PACOM Foreign Policy Advisor (FPA) Ravic Huso and PolCouns Clarke (notetaker) sat in on the U.S. side.

SOUTHERN VIOLENCE -- PM THAKSIN'S DISMANTLING OF SECURITY ORGANIZATIONS

14. (C) In initial comments, Sunai said that the bombings and daily violence in the South are being carried out by "local rogue separatists and radical religious elements," who are beyond the power of southern Muslim elders to control. The violence is worsening and turning to soft targets, and the Thai government cannot stamp out the new phenomena, he said. Sunai contrasted the current situation with a more stable period which had held for years before Prime Minister Thaksin took power. In the earlier period, barriers between southern populations of different religions had broken down and, despite occasional violence, support for separatism largely disappeared.

15. (C) Sunai blamed the policies of PM Thaksin -- undertaken after he had received information that the separatist movement in the South was contained -- for the ensuing tension and upsurge in violence in (primarily) the three southernmost Thai provinces. Specifically, early in his first term, Thaksin dismantled the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC) and the related Joint (civilian, military, police) Task Force 43 -- institutions which had contributed to a workable modus vivendi -- and gave primacy to the police for southern security. The police engaged in abuses, including extra-judicial killings (EJK) and this, Sunai said, led to a reaction in the Muslim population and wider support for separatist and extremist causes and the use of violence.

HISTORICAL TENSIONS

16. (C) Clearly in reaction to part of Sunai's analysis, Dr. Gothom stated flatly that the current Southern separatist movement has "nothing to do with religion." Rather, it is a matter of preservation of identity, especially language, ethnicity, and customs. (Comment: All of which in the Thai South have religious aspects. End Comment.) Gothom briefly reviewed Thailand's history of nation-state building, when

national myths were created, and the emphasis was on "Thai-ness" to the detriment of competing languages and minority ways of life. He said that the Thai government in recent decades had allowed greater religious freedom, and was more relaxed on language, which in the South had opened the way for more use of the local dialects, the establishment of "pondoks" (Islamic schools), and building of more mosques. The public schools in the South, he said, are half-empty.

17. (C) Dr. Gotham added there is no monolithic Islam in the South, even though Islam has been used and exploited to magnify other conditions. He said the government must convince southerners they have a future as part of Thailand. They must be allowed to achieve something short of a separate state. The Ambassador asked how much autonomy they could actually achieve. Gotham said that under Article 78 of the Constitution, all provinces in Thailand could become as autonomous as Bangkok, the capital city. Panitan noted that the Thai South already enjoys more "freedom" than Malaysian states. He reiterated that the military needs to regain "lost ground" by accepting some of the changes in attitudes that have already taken place among southern Muslims. ADM Fallon commented that in a situation like this it was the national leaders who had to be flexible and generous to achieve progress.

#### UNPRECEDENTED VIOLENCE AND THE POTENTIAL FOR WIDER IMPACT

18. (C) Dr. Panitan stated that, even in this small group, it was clear the Thais did not agree among themselves about how to understand the South. He argued that the RTG faces an unprecedented situation in the deep South, one very different from the past. The level of violence is far higher, going from about 30 deaths a year to about 600. (Note: Most local commentators use a figure of about 500 deaths for 2004, with perhaps 200 more so far in 2005. End Note.) "Ordinary" explanations (read: separatism), Panitan said, are no longer applicable, implying that the situation had changed qualitatively as well as quantitatively. He cited a claim by former Foreign Minister Dr. Surin Pitsuwan that the level of violence in Thailand's deep South is "worse than Aceh." He warned that the situation should not be regarded as local or isolated because the five Muslim majority provinces have the potential to affect the whole region if they become a staging ground from which outsiders could launch terrorist acts.

19. (C) Tamthai countered Panitan's picture of the potential of the southern situation. Like Dr. Gotham, he too stressed the separatist origin of the violence, and said that there had been similar Bangkok-South friction in the past. In his view, it was weak analysis to focus on outside factors. He emphasized poor governance and abuses by the authorities as the key drivers behind the separatist movement. "It is one thing to live in the middle of abuses, and another when you are abused by your former enemy. Pattani pride is elusive but key in this matter," he said, adding that "the good thing about Pattani pride is that it trumps Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)." Sunai commented that younger generations of southern Muslims are indeed talking more about "suppression by Siam."

#### NEW FACTORS: INTERNET AND MONEY

110. (C) ADM Fallon asked what new factors were involved. Panitan said that Thai separatists had ready access to information about terrorist techniques on the Internet and were influenced by "bad examples" in other countries. This led to "copycat" actions. He said that although the South is a poor region, an enormous amount of money has entered the South outside the formal banking system, over 600 million baht (about USD 15 million), according to Thai Anti-Money Laundering Organization (AMLO) estimates. There might be more, Panitan asserted, given the involvement of officials and members of Parliament (MP) in the South in various forms of transnational crime across the open borders and extensive use of front companies. How much of this money is intended for or available to militant separatists is unknown. However, the violence of the past year, has made politicians more reluctant to involve themselves with separatists with whom they had collaborated with in the past.

#### THE DIFFICULTIES OF GOOD ANALYSIS

111. (C) Panitan said it is very hard for the government to get a clear picture of the South as different agencies provided PM Thaksin with competing analyses. ADM Fallon said he was familiar with the "stove piping" phenomenon. Panitan said that, although the Prime Minister seemed satisfied with the intelligence he receives, he needs a more "scientific" approach to information gathering, something more than "beating information out of teenagers."

112. (C) ADM Fallon asked whether there had been any systematic Thai effort to sit down, list all the factors, and decide on a course of action. Dr. Tamthai responded that the problem was that everyone thinks that they know the root cause of the renewed violence in the South and they care

primarily about proving their particular thesis rather than adjusting it to new facts. Psychologically, because the South is different culturally from the rest of Thailand, the effect seems to be that Thai analysts feel freer to take this tack. "And all the evidence can be interpreted to fit into all the different views," he said.

#### OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

13. (C) FPA Huso asked about the extent to which what is happening in the world influences southern violence. Panitan argued that, if one looks at what some teachers are conveying in the pondok classrooms, outside events are influential. That is also evident in the way local leaders are losing control. He said this happened every time there is a move towards greater assimilation of the South into Thailand. Separatist militants have a long history of somehow getting together, adopting a new name and adjusting to new conditions. Militants from time to time are able to manipulate other southerners by using religious schools to indoctrinate students to perceive Thai and US policies as injustices to Muslims.

14. (C) Panitan observed that this type of manipulation is easier to do in a time of less regulation and more openness. He said that, in earlier years, former Prime Minister Prem had contained the situation and the separatist organizations had collapsed. At a later period, the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) had been "recruited" (i.e. bought off) by the military to help intervene in the electoral system. Panitan said that radical Islam, however, was now proving to be an effective tool. The students are more radical, and are led by people who received training outside Thailand, for example, in Afghanistan. The Thai National Intelligence Agency (NIA), he said, believes that these leaders are the key people behind the violence and, with the abolition of SBPAC, it is harder to track them.

#### PROSPECTS OF THE NATIONAL RECONCILIATION COMMITTEE (NRC); PRESSURE ON BUDDHISTS

15. (C) ADM Fallon said that the situation still seemed quite manageable and asked what the U.S. could do that was appropriate. He also asked about the NRC and whether it was empowered. Tamthai said the Prime Minister's recent "softer" line was reflected in the creation of the NRC. Sunai said that, no matter how serious PM Thaksin is about a softer approach through the NRC, convincing southerners will be difficult. "He decided to launch Tak Bai" (in October 2004) and Muslims are convinced that there can be no justice from the government. They were shocked when General Panlop, who had been in charge of the assault on Krue Se Mosque in April 2004, boasted on the anniversary of that incident that he had been promoted.

16. (C) ADM Fallon asked whether the NRC was trusted in the South. Three of the Thais said "yes." Panitan replied "not yet" and said that the NRC represented a possible new beginning and fresh approach, if used properly by PM Thaksin. The NRC has the potential to win the hearts and minds of Southerners, but does not yet have the full confidence of the Prime Minister. Panitan said that the task facing the NRC will take months, even years. The question was whether PM Thaksin merely wanted the NRC to allow him to talk less about the South while NRC head Anand talked more. Tamthai said that people want the NRC to do too many different things, and have various timetables and expectations for it. Panitan said that the NRC needs to gain the support of the military Supreme Command and its numerous special taskforces that are working on the South. He claimed that Supreme Command will be able to provide 30 thousand jobs.

17. (C) FPA Huso asked about reports that militants actions were designed to pressure non-Muslims to leave the South. Panitan said this was happening informally. Many Buddhists were moving their families away. The strategy seemed to be both to drive out Buddhists and to buy them out. He said that his uncle had been killed after he refused to sell his gas station.

#### WHAT CAN THE U.S. DO TO HELP?

18. (C) Dr. Gotham returned to ADM Fallon's question about appropriate American assistance. He said that, in the South, the U.S. is regarded as being on the wrong side of the Middle East conflicts, in Iraq and in the Israel-Palestine question. He said the U.S. should be a better broker between Israel and Palestine. After ADM Fallon defended U.S. policy in the Middle East, Gotham offered the idea that the U.S. could train the Thai military in peacekeeping, noting that a military officer who served in East Timor had told him he had gained positive lessons ("avoid firearms; be a social engineer") from that experience.

19. (C) Sunai also said that U.S. actions are interpreted

negatively in the South, including its activities in Thailand such as Cobra Gold. But he thought there was value in U.S. engagement with the Thai military to train them in the international rules on conflict and human rights. He added a plea that the U.S. strictly vet Thai military personnel selected for training so that soldiers who had been involved in human rights abuses were not selected.

120. (C) Panitan agreed with the other Thais that U.S. policy in the Middle East created problems for the American image in the South. He said that the U.S. could appropriately help southerners gain a real say in their own affairs and less "Bangkok knows best." He said that he was a southerner, and knew from growing up there that the basic desire of his neighbors was to live their own way, not under the sway of "influential" people (i.e. fixers and local crime bosses) and in fear of MPs and police officers. Independence, he said, was not the answer. Rather, the South needs "good governance, within the Constitution."

121. (C ) Panitan recalled that he had worked on draft plans to change the attitudes of the military towards southerners, and they had all failed badly. Individuals were brought around, but the structure had never changed. He said that if the U.S. could put pressure on the RTG to change the system, not individuals, the situation in the South might be alleviated. ADM Fallon responded that the U.S. would continue to influence the Thai military through education and training, including peacekeeping training, and through direct dialogue with senior Thai leaders.

#### BURMA AND CHINA

122. (C) Panitan briefly raised two other issues: Burma and China. He said that Burma will be a bigger regional problem in the future and that the Thaksin policy of engagement (i.e., being a "big brother") has been unsuccessful. He warned against the growing influence of North Korea and Russia in Burma. Sunai agreed that Burma is a growing source of regional instability. He said that when it comes to Burma, the RTG appears to accept a principle of "compromise at all costs" in pursuit of its own goals. Panitan also expressed concern about the growing influence of China in the region and Thailand. He urged the U.S. to engage publics more about China and the problems it poses. Panitan said that Chinese were moving into Thailand to the extent of even buying land in the South.

#### BOYCE